



IN THE NEWS . . .

A clear link between Saddam and Osama bin Laden

Found: A Smoking Gun

By William Safire
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In the town of Kalar, about a hundred miles northeast of Baghdad, Kurdish villagers recently reported suspicious activity to the pesh merga.

That Kurdish militia has for years been waging a bloody battle with Ansar al-Islam, the terrorist group affiliated with Al Qaeda in Afghanistan and supported by Saddam Hussein in Iraq. It captured a courier carrying a message that demolishes the repeated claim of Bush critics that there was never a "clear link" between Saddam and Osama bin Laden.

The terrorist courier with a CD-ROM containing a 17-page document and other messages was Hassan Ghul, who confessed he was taking to Al Qaeda the Ansar document setting forth a strategy to start an Iraqi civil war, along with a plea for reinforcements. The Kurds turned him over to Americans for further interrogation, which is proving fruitful.

The Times reporter Dexter Filkins in Baghdad, backed up by Douglas Jehl in D.C., broke the story exclusively. Editors marked its significance by placing it on the front page above the fold. Although The Washington Post the next day buried it on Page 17 (and Newsweek may construe as bogus any Saddam-Osama connection) the messages' authenticity was best attested by the amazed U.S. official who told Reuters, "We couldn't make this up if we tried."

The author of the lengthy Ansar-to-Qaeda electronic message is suspected of being the most wanted terror operative in the world today: Abu Musab al-Zarqawi, long familiar to readers of this space as "the man with the limp," who personifies the link of Ansar and Al Qaeda.

On Sept. 24, 2001 — not two weeks after 9/11 — Kurdish sources led me to report: "The clear link between the terrorist in hiding [Osama] and the terrorist in power [Saddam] can be found in Kurdistan. . . . The Iraqi dictator has armed and financed a fifth column of Al Qaeda mullahs and terrorists. . . . Some 400 'Arab Afghan' mercenaries . . . have already murdered a high Kurdish official as well as a Muslim scholar who dared to interpret the Koran humanely."

The C.I.A. blew off that report. Our National Security Council did not learn of subsequent warfare against the Kurds by the Qaeda affiliate doing Saddam's bidding until its members read it in The Times. After Jeffrey Goldberg of the New Yorker and C. J. Chivers of The Times developed the story from inside northern Iraq, it dawned on some intelligence analysts that a "clear link" was probable.

On Oct. 7, 2002, President Bush said "We know that Iraq and Al Qaeda have had high-level contacts that go back a decade. Some Al Qaeda leaders who fled Afghanistan went to Iraq. These include one very senior Al Qaeda leader who received medical treatment in Baghdad this year."

The leader whose leg was treated, perhaps amputated, in Baghdad was identified here in January 2003, as Zarqawi (twice, after one misspelling). The presence of this international terrorist for two months in a Baghdad hospital required the approval of Saddam's ubiquitous secret police.

In his U.N. speech the following month, Colin Powell publicly identified the Palestinian, born in Jordan, as one who oversaw a terrorist training camp in Afghanistan three years before: "Iraq today harbors a deadly terrorist network headed by Abu Musab al-Zarqawi, an associate and collaborator of Osama bin Laden."

Now we have documentary evidence of Ansar's current operation: employing suicide bombers to foment a civil war in Iraq that would reinstate safe haven for terrorists. The notion that these serial killers are not central players in the global network that attacked us — that the Ansar boss in Iraq must be found carrying an official Qaeda membership card signed by bin Laden — is simply silly.

Of the liberation's three casus belli, one was to stop mass murder, bloodier than in Kosovo; we are finding horrific mass graves in Iraq. Another was informed suspicion that a clear link existed between world terror and Saddam; this terrorist plea for Qaeda reinforcements to kill Iraqi democracy is the smoking gun proving that.

The third was a reasoned judgment that Saddam had a bioweapon that could wipe out a city; in time, we are likely to find a buried suitcase containing that, too.

Sent by the House Armed Services Committee Communications Office

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